

Trotter Review

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Trotter Institute Review*

Article 4

3-20-1990

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Kirk A. (1990) "Media Images of Boston's Black Community," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol4/iss1/4

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Media Images of Boston's Black Community

by
Kirk A. Johnson

**To the media, we offer this challenge:
Convex lenses must become concave.
Rev. Jesse Jackson¹**

Boston, Massachusetts, the "birthplace of liberty," has a profoundly troubled history of race relations. Open hostility to blacks, as evidenced by Ku Klux Klan-style cross burnings and episodes of white-on-black violence, is part of the city's legacy. For many black residents, the vigorous and sometimes bloody opposition to court-ordered school integration that marked the 1970s only punctuated a long-standing pattern of discrimination that surfaces in myriad forms throughout the city. A 1985 report by the University of Massachusetts' William Monroe Trotter Institute documented deeply entrenched inequities in housing, education, and employment for blacks—inequities that, in the words of MIT city planner Dr. Philip L. Clay, have placed black Bostonians "on the downside of a slippery slope."² As one local black woman explained to the *Boston Globe*, "People think this is the South Africa of America."³

In their efforts to report on the forces that affect Boston's racial climate, the local media have typically focused on the more obvious institutional actors: businesses, city hall, school boards, churches, the courts, neighborhood groups. Rarely have the media themselves been subjected to the same scrutiny. This study represents one such effort. It is an analysis of the images of Boston's black community that are conveyed through the local news media. It asks the question: If a Bostonian relied solely on the local news for information about local blacks, what impressions would he or she be left with, and how representative of reality might those impressions be?

Given Boston's housing patterns, the question is far from academic. Much of the city is made up of tightly segregated neighborhoods, places where white residents might have little or no meaningful contact with blacks. Similarly, Boston's suburbs have failed to follow a national pattern of modest gains in black residents. People who do not interact with blacks would seem particularly vulnerable to



media images whose accuracy they can neither verify nor reject on the basis of their personal experience. And yet all of us, no matter where we live, tend to internalize the messages we receive through the media. To the extent that those messages contradict racist attitudes about blacks or reinforce them, the local media stand as agents for positive social change or unwitting perpetrators of racism.

To better understand how the local media portray Boston's black community, I monitored news reports from a sample of newspapers and radio and television stations for one month during the summer of 1986. I noted the roles blacks played, the activities blacks were shown to be engaged in, and the events that brought blacks into the news. By comparing the portrayal of blacks in Boston's major media with portrayals in the black media, I sought to understand the criteria that reporters and editors use to judge the newsworthiness of items relating to the black community and to understand whether (and if so, why) the images broadcast about blacks may be unrepresentative.

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Background on Racism and the Media

During the summer of 1981, *TV Guide* magazine offered a rare glimpse into the plight of black network news reporters.⁴ The magazine surveyed such luminaries as ABC anchor Max Robinson, CBS correspondent Ed Bradley, and PBS reporter Charlayne Hunter-Gault for their views on the networks' sensi-

tivity to racial issues. The consensus was that the networks were guilty of unconscious racism—the notion instinctively held but never verbalized (and, if suggested, vigorously denied)—that blacks are inferior to whites. According to these reporters, this racism is reflected in the stories that air about blacks, the stories that never air, and the images of blacks that do and do not appear on the screen.

For example, Paul Good, author of *The Trouble I've Seen: White Journalist/Black Movement*, found in a random check of 16 months of network news during 1975 and 1976 “a consistent failure to cover minority stories.” There was a report in *The New York Times*, for example, that revealed plans to increase minority hiring had been approved at only 31 of 1,300 eligible colleges nationwide—this at a time when affirmative action programs were being widely denounced as unfair to whites. Another report chronicled an impossible logjam of 125,000 discrimination cases at the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The report emerged the day after MIT economist Lester Thurow warned that, despite the appearance of progress, “Nothing has changed in the past thirty years to narrow the income gap between blacks and whites.” These were two of the dozens of minority-oriented stories of national importance that failed to appear on network news.⁵

Critics also charge that the minority stories that the networks do cover tend to reinforce negative stereotypes about blacks. Tony Batten, now a producer for *60 Minutes*, remembers how he approached the executive producer of WNET-TV news

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in New York City to suggest a feature on the behind-the-scenes preparations for *Bubbling Brown Sugar*. At the time, the play—which is about life in Harlem—was rumored to be Broadway’s next hit. The WNET-TV producer was disappointed by the dress rehearsal he sat through—he felt that it had no book, no score, no lyrics worth remembering—but told Batten that the play had given him another idea: a news feature on the drug trade in Harlem.⁶ *Bubbling Brown Sugar* had nothing to do with drugs, but the play had tapped into what the producer knew about blacks—that blacks are drug abusers.

This anecdote illustrates the common complaint among black reporters that news executives often select stories that fit white perceptions of who black people are—perceptions that may not be accurate. PBS reporter Charlayne Hunter-Gault says the networks have a history of covering blacks only in moments of crisis. “There are about as many nice, ordinary, everyday human-interest stories about black

people on television as there are black brides on *The New York Times* society page.”⁷ Indeed, one survey found that although blacks appeared in nearly 25% of network television news reports in the early 1970s, they were mostly in nonspeaking roles in stories related to busing, desegregation, and other civil rights issues.⁸

Many observers agree that the single largest reason for the networks’ poor coverage of racial news is related to the racial makeup of the networks’ own staffs. Blacks currently account for 12% of the U.S. population. But according to Operation PUSH, the Chicago-based, black-empowerment group, only 5% of the 9,700 top officers and managers of the three major news networks are black. Operation

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PUSH has called for a black boycott of CBS, citing the network’s particularly poor hiring record for minorities and inattention to black-oriented news. At CBS’s annual meeting in April, PUSH national president Rev. Jesse Jackson offered the following statistics to station executives: “Today, there are zero black or Hispanic station managers at CBS. Zero black or Hispanic executive producers.” Jackson continued, “Three wars [are] being waged on the continent right now: Libya, Angola, and South Africa. More than one-eighth of the human race, more than thirty million Americans are of African heritage. Yet CBS has no news bureaus between the Sahara and the Cape of Good Hope.”⁹

The hiring record of the print media is comparable. In 1967, before a rush to hire minority newspaper journalists, fewer than 5% of the editorial staffs in the news business were black. For editors and supervisors, the figure was less than 1%, and most of them worked for black-owned organizations.¹⁰ In 1985, the number of minority newspaper journalists in the United States stood at 5.7%. That figure represented a slight decline from the year before, despite a stated goal of newspaper editors to integrate newsrooms by the year 2000.¹¹ It is clear that, despite incremental gains, the magnitude of minority participation in the newspaper business has not changed significantly in the past 20 years.

The racial composition of the people who bring us the news is crucial to understanding the images of blacks that the news projects. While many of the rules of the news business are clear-cut and easy to articulate—codes of ethics for journalists, for example—the rules that govern the selection and presentation of news are much more subjective. Interviews with reporters and editors have consistently shown that the often-mentioned commodity known as “news sense” is amorphous. “We are not talking

about a science or a technique,” concluded one study on television news reporting. “[I]t is really an art which is at the fingertips of the practitioner. It depends on many thousands of personal judgments, moods, and feelings.”¹² Much of what a fledgling reporter learns about developing a sense of what is or is not newsworthy is picked up unconsciously from newsroom veterans. In time, says Harold Evans, editorial director for *U.S. News and World Report*, “so many of the judgments become so routine that we forget we are making them.”¹³

Because the decision of what is news involves subjective and often subconscious judgment, the depiction of blacks can be defined by the expectations of white news managers. Analyses of reports of race-related news in the United States and Britain suggest not only a tendency for news professionals to place events within a framework of familiar images and stereotypes, but the even more disturbing practice of judging the newsworthiness of a story.

In *Racism and the Mass Media*, mass communications experts Paul Hartmann and Charles Husband suggest that current events that conform to a reporter’s preconceived notions stand a better chance of making the news than those that challenge these notions, and that subsequent events may be interpreted in terms of existing images even when those images are no longer appropriate.¹⁴ Thus, while a Broadway play about Harlem’s artistic heritage was an illogical inspiration for a news story about drugs, the news producer who made the suggestion was fitting the play into a set of prevailing images about blacks—even as he sat and witnessed evidence that the images were inappropriate.

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Hartmann and Husband offer another reason for the media’s inattention to the root causes of racial problems. They argue that the condition of blacks is not a primary concern of whites until blacks threaten the status quo. Boycotts, demonstrations, teen pregnancy, violent crime: these issues all cross thresholds of newsworthiness for the white media, despite the fact that they are but manifestations of deeply rooted conditions for blacks—conditions that the media rarely explore—and that when such news reports emerge as the sole portrayals of black Americans, the audience receives little impression of the richness and diversity of the black community.¹⁵

The very forces that underlie news production constitute a built-in tendency to present news that reinforces stereotypes and discourages serious discussion of racial issues. One obstacle to balanced reporting is the tendency of the media to focus on negative stories, which means that black achieve-

ment is less likely to be covered than black failure.¹⁶

Another impediment is the media’s attraction to stories that are easy to cover. Stories with action and excitement (such as the civil rights marches of the sixties), those that involve easily recognized key figures (such as Dr. Martin Luther King), and those

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with straightforward plots stand a greater chance of being covered than issues such as modern-day racism, which is more subtle and more complex than the racism of 20 years ago.

Racial issues do not always satisfy the media’s criteria for the ideal news story, all neat and packaged, but that does not mean that issues are unworthy of coverage. When executives do not realize that their news decisions are inexorably guided by their own color—as is true for people of all races—the dangers of presenting the news from a single perspective become clear. Thus there is the need to open the ranks of the media’s decision-making positions to representative numbers of minorities. As Rev. Jesse Jackson puts it, “Since the media cannot attain absolute objectivity, it must press for fairness.”¹⁷

This issue of fairness is the overriding reason for this study. As the news media flash images of Boston’s residents, is the city’s black community represented fairly? To what extent does local news suffer from the same problems that hinder fair coverage of black issues at the national television networks—typecasting of black reporters, neglect of black-related news, reinforcement of negative stereotypes about blacks? To answer these questions, a sample of local news reports was taken to form a representative collection of images of the black community as seen through the eyes of the media.

Study Design

This study used a sample of local news reports to obtain a representative collection of images of Boston’s black community. Of the dozens of media outlets in the metropolitan Boston area, 11 were selected for the study: five newspapers, three television stations, and three radio stations. Without explanation, one of the radio stations later declined after initially agreeing to participate, bringing the total to ten. Six of these are major media outlets:

Newspaper	Television	Radio
<i>Boston Globe</i> (daily)	WGBH (10:00 p.m.)	WBCN-FM
<i>Boston Herald</i> (daily)	WBZ (6:00 p.m.)	(5:57-9:00 a.m.)
	WCVB (11:00 p.m.)	

These outlets were selected primarily on the basis of their size. The *Boston Globe* and the *Boston Herald* are New England's first and second largest selling newspapers, with daily circulations of 514,000 and 355,000, respectively.¹⁸ WBZ and WCVB were ranked first and second in commercial television ratings for 1985, with average daily audiences of 1,209,000 and 1,129,000, respectively.¹⁹ Public broadcasting station WGBH rates fourth among UHF stations in New England, with a daily audience of 40,000.²⁰ WBCN-FM, a 50,000-watt, contemporary-format station, was the second most popular radio station during the study period, according to Arbitron ratings.²¹

Four media outlets in Boston are owned and operated largely by blacks:

Newspapers	Radio
<i>Bay State Banner</i> (weekly)	WILD-AM
<i>Boston Greater News</i> (weekly)	(5:50-11:20 a.m.)
<i>Roxbury Community News</i> (monthly)	

These newspapers have a combined circulation in excess of 20,000; the radio station ranks 15th in the Boston market, broadcasting to an estimated 24,000 daily listeners.²² These four outlets are primary sources of information about the city's black community.

The staffs of the black media outlets are virtually 100% black. At the major media outlets, the number of black employees varies. The best available estimates indicate that these six media outlets employ 69 blacks on news staffs that total 699 employees, for an overall black presence of 9.9%.

The 8% average for blacks at the two major newspapers is above the current national average of 5.7%.²³ Likewise, the 15.1% average for the four broadcast stations is higher than the current national average of 8.7%.²⁴ None of the local figures, either individually or in combination, reflect black employees in numbers representative of the 22% black population of the city of Boston. They are greater, however, than the 6% black population of the larger metropolitan area from which the news was drawn.²⁵

The study encompasses news reports for the period June 9, 1986, to July 9, 1986. Because some news outlets do not operate on weekends, only weekday news reports were included. The beginning and ending dates were selected arbitrarily.

Local media offer regional, national, and international news as well as news from the immediate locality. For the purposes of this study, local news was defined as news that (1) took place in the city of Boston or within a 30-mile radius of the city, or (2) involved local people or institutions, regardless of where the actual event took place.

Newspapers were home-delivered, scripts of radio newscasts were supplied by the stations, and televi-

sion broadcasts were recorded on a videocassette recorder. For each news story, the date and source were recorded. Each story was assigned a two- three-, or four-letter code describing the geographic location of the story and the category of news the story represents. Each news item was briefly summarized.

The unspoken message is that all criminals may not be black, but most blacks are criminals.

The race of the persons in the story was recorded according to whether the item included blacks, other minorities, whites only, or whether the race of the subject(s) was unspecified or otherwise unclear. If a story mentioned blacks or other minorities, the context of these mentions was recorded. Any additional notes or comments to help clarify the news item were also included.

The same item appearing in two different media outlets was treated as two separate stories; news stories repeated within the same outlets (as with a radio station's repetition of the top news of the day) were counted as one story.

Findings

Information was collected on a total of 3,215 local news stories. Of these, 2,125 stories (69%) originated within the city of Boston; the remainder took place in outlying communities or beyond. The major media accounted for 2,898 stories (90%); the black media for 317 (10%). The print media accounted for 2,501 stories (81%); the broadcast media for 569 (19%).

News from the black media was dominated by WILD-AM radio, which accounted for nearly half (47%) of the news items. WILD relies heavily for news on the *Boston Globe*, the *Boston Herald*, and other major outlets.²⁶ The station is the only black media outlet to engage in this practice. When WILD was excluded from the tally of news from the black media, 5 of the 15 most frequently appearing categories of news appeared more frequently in the black media than they did in the major media: education, city government, miscellaneous (community and cultural events), arts, and profiles of educators and entrepreneurs. The significance of this finding lies in the extent to which it counters widespread assumptions about the black community. For example, blacks are often associated with indifference to education, as "evidenced" by high rates of dropout and failure from schools.

There were distinct differences in how the black media and the major media reported news from Roxbury and Mattapan, the two predominantly black (78% and 81% black, respectively) neighborhoods in Boston. Again, the divergence in coverage was most pronounced when the one black radio sta-

tion was factored out of the totals for the black media. In the major media, crime was the focus of 59% of the news about these two neighborhoods. News of domestic violence and accidents contributed another 11%, so that 70% of the news reports coming from Roxbury and Mattapan concerned either crime or violence. In the black media crime was high priority, but it was mentioned less frequently than in the major media and was followed by education and a half dozen other categories of news that do not appear in major media.

Even when stories dealt with social inequity . . . most reporters failed to acknowledge racism as an underlying mechanism. . . . Euphemisms such as "disadvantaged student" or "the underprivileged" suggest a reluctance to acknowledge who or what is causing the "disadvantage."

A total of 110 stories about these two predominantly black neighborhoods appeared in the major and the black media. In the major media, 85% (39 of 46) of the news items reinforced negative stereotypes about blacks. Blacks were portrayed as drug pushers, thieves, and as victims or perpetrators of violence.

Only 22% (10 of 46) of the stories contradicted prevailing assumptions about blacks. (Some stories both reinforced and challenged stereotypes.) The scarcity of news stories that challenge stereotypes of blacks is consistent with the observation by Hartmann and Husband that news personnel are more likely to report stories that align with their preconceptions of blacks than they are to report stories that challenge these preconceptions.

In contrast, a significant number of the news stories reported by the black media challenge negative expectations about blacks. At least 31 of the 66 stories (47%) reveal aspects of the black community that are both positive and rarely portrayed on the major news media: a thirst for educational achievement, eagerness to remedy living conditions poisoned by poverty and bureaucratic neglect, and advancement of the world of business and finance. When news from WILD radio is excluded, the figures are even higher (27 of 47 news stories, or 57%).

These numbers suggest that the major media news about Roxbury and Mattapan is biased in the direction of commonly held stereotypes about blacks and about the poor. Stories featuring crime and violence predominate, even in the presence of newsworthy stories that reveal aspects of the black community that defy these stereotypes.

Roxbury and Mattapan appear in only 1% of the news carried by Boston's major media. As a result, these two communities do not dominate any one category of news. But because the news that does

emerge from these black enclaves is heavily weighted toward crime and violence — and away from education, entrepreneurship, art, community pride, and other positive concepts — the typical news consumer might easily associate these negative images with inner-city blacks. For example, 93% of the crime reported in the major media occurred outside Roxbury and Mattapan. But 59% of the news from these two neighborhoods concerned crime. The unspoken message is that all criminals may not be black, but most blacks are criminals.

One of the clearest indications of the media's attitudes towards blacks was the reporting that occurred on stories that directly involved racism. Of the 2,898 news items in the major media, approximately 15 had overt, direct links to themes of racism and race relations. In six cases, the media dealt with the question of racism squarely and thoughtfully. In the remaining nine stories, the impact and importance of racism was either not explored or not acknowledged.

Even when stories dealt with social inequity, including clear disparities in education and employment and black-community disenchantment, most reporters failed to acknowledge racism as an underlying mechanism. When racism was acknowledged, it was portrayed on three occasions as a historical footnote rather than a continuing tradition. Unlike the words "sexism" or "ageism," "racism" seemed to be taboo, rarely uttered in the major media. Euphemisms such as "disadvantaged student" or "the underprivileged" suggest a reluctance to acknowledge who or what is causing the "disadvantage." These tendencies reflect the racial composition and, to an extent, the class orientation of the people who bring Boston its news.

In addition to examining individual categories of news, much can be learned by considering themes that cut across category lines. Scrutinizing the 2,898 news items that emerged from the major media brought insights into such overarching issues as how blacks are portrayed, how whites are portrayed in relation to blacks, and how the media report on news stories that touch on racism.

As objects of news reports, blacks in a number of stories were shown in positive roles or engaged in nonstereotypical activities. Black people were shown as possessing special expertise in law (judge, attorney, expert on sexual harassment, special prosecutor hand-picked by Governor Dukakis); in medicine (physician's assistant, rescuer in auto accident); and in law enforcement (police officer, police recruits). They were shown devoted to solving community problems (neighborhood activists, director of a cocaine addiction center) and aspiring to art (dance students). In a season of successful basketball and baseball teams, the talents of black athletes also won consistent praise.

However, blacks were mentioned most frequently as athletes, entertainers, criminals, and as visible figures in education and politics. These five categories alone accounted for 78% of the news items that mentioned blacks. When an ethnic group is repeatedly portrayed in certain roles and activities, the group seems more homogeneous than it really is. It

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would be easy for a Bostonian to come away from the news with the impression that most blacks are accomplished athletes, talented entertainers, or dangerous criminals. But pigeonholing blacks in this way denies the diversity of the black community, diversity that lets blacks be seen as individual human beings instead of categories. Offering a balanced view of who black people really are—people—can help erode stereotypes that for both whites and blacks lead to limited expectations of the black community.

Conclusions

The concern that Boston's black activists, community leaders, and media managers voice over news depictions of the black community is supported by sociological studies. Most of the research on the psychological effects of the mass media has ignored minorities and the poor; one 1975 analysis of 2,300 studies on the effects of television found that only 7% contained noteworthy data on these two populations.²⁷ But the information that is available, much of it regarding television, suggests that the mass media have a significant impact on an individual's self-concept and on his or her conception of others.

Socialization begins early. By the time black children reach late elementary and junior high school, they report that they turn to television expressly to learn how different people behave, talk, look, and dress.²⁸ Whether the issue is job roles,²⁹ sex roles,³⁰ or overall behavior patterns, young black adolescents and teens say they derive a substantial portion of what they know from the mass media—often more so than whites, perhaps partly because blacks on average watch more television than do whites.³¹ Black youths have even reported learning more about black people from television than did their white peers.³² Clearly the mass media are but one

source of information about the world, a source that may not exert as much influence as parents, teachers, or friends. Whether or not the media comprise the primary influences, however, the fact that they play a palpable role in the lives of black youth seems clear.

Common sense, too, dictates that the messages we hear from people in positions of authority influence how we see others, how others see us, and how we see ourselves. We may not remember the factual details of a news broadcast, but impressions can be unforgettable. It makes sense that if the news reflects the cultural and racial biases, no matter how subtle, of the people who produce it, then those who consume the news will be drawn to internalize those biases.

What will it take for the major media to represent the black community more fairly? Will it take the publication of a newspaper that misrepresents the white community in ways that the major media misrepresent the black community? If a paper contained news that reflected one-sided, black-held perceptions of whites, the financial and business section might span 100 pages ("all whites care about is making money"); the sports section might feature weekend athletes nursing overtaxed muscles ("all white athletes are awkward and out of shape"); and the "living" section might profile a yuppie couple who point to their collection of Motown record albums as evidence that they are not racist, while refusing to pay their black housekeeper more than minimum wage because "she would only spend it foolishly" ("all whites are blind to their racism"). Reading news based on such oversimplified views of who white people are and what they do might bring white editors and reporters fresh appreciation for the frustration that the black community feels over news based on equally unrealistic stereotypes of black people. Even more important, it might bring an understanding that all misrepresentations of racial groups spring from similar feelings—fear, distrust, anger—that are rooted in unfamiliarity, and that by increasing the number of minorities on news staffs, especially in key decision-making positions, the major media gain people whose familiarity with the minority community makes them less likely to misrepresent it.

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